

On the Right Road

On this All Saints Day when we are reminded of the saints who have gone before, we encounter texts that blur the line between past, present, and future by encouraging us to travel the long trodden road toward God's love, justice, and liberation.

Focus scripture: Matthew 5:1–12

Those who follow Jesus up the mountain, both disciples and the crowd, can hardly be faulted for being reminded of Moses who helped shape a motley crew of wandering ex-slaves into a community of liberation. Biblical scholars point out the many ways the gospel of Matthew helps make the connection between Jesus and Moses. It is on this mountain that Jesus offers an inaugural sermon akin to Jesus' inaugural message at Nazareth, which is recorded in the gospel of Luke. In both Nazareth and on the mountain, Jesus sets forth the identity, purpose, and direction of his ministry.

The crowd, hanging further back, are keenly aware of the poverty and injustices they face at the hands of imperial Rome. Can this Jesus make any difference in their lives and world? The disciples have already thrown their lot in with Jesus, but their understanding of what Jesus is calling them to be and do is still in the formative stage. As a prophet and leader of the divinely inspired liberation movement to which Moses earlier gave leadership, Jesus knows what is at stake.

By his very life, Jesus represents for the people the character of God who calls them into a liberated and justice-oriented way of living that is in direct opposition to the controlling, oppressive way of living established by Rome. Jesus invites and encourages them to be citizens of this new way of being, which he calls the kingdom of God.

The blessings that follow only make sense for a people who recognize the threat of domination systems because they live it. Each blessing is designed to support, encourage, and nurture a way of life that is counter to the exploitation and oppression they are familiar with. In his commentary in *Feasting on the Word*, Patrick Gray tells us that the word blessing translated from the Hebrew *ashar* is best translated "you are on the right road." In other words, Jesus says, "You are on the right road when you are in poor in spirit...when you mourn...when you are meek...when you hunger and thirst

for righteousness."

Being on the right road and blessing are synonymous. There is no contradiction between mourning and blessing if you are on the road toward God's realm of liberation and justice. Each of the blessings takes on new and vital meaning because they are no longer about an unrealizable aspiration. On the contrary, they are about the energy, spirit, and power given to everyone in the present who is on this road. For those who are on the right road, there also exists a new experience of time, one in which those who have died or gone before share in the present, offering support and encouragement. Something we might expect from all the saints.

Revelation 7:9–1 confronts imperial Rome and systems of domination with vivid and dramatic eschatological language, picturing a future in which the blessings have come into fullness. Differences of language, culture, or any other means of human separation create no barriers for inclusion in this place of justice, compassion, and healing. Revelation calls upon the churches to become witnesses to this ultimate promise.

The writer of **Psalm 34:1–10, 22** refuses to let troubles of any sort keep one from living in the blessing and presence of God. In all situations, one can magnify the glory of God because it is never about momentary loss, but rather living in relationship with this God of liberation, justice, and mercy.

1 John 3:1–3 returns to the theme of identity and purpose. Core to that identity is the basic premise of knowing you are loved. It is this love that purifies us for living as citizens of God's realm.

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In this week's readings, there is no disconnect between hard times and God's love. Just the opposite, love can lead us into the struggle of a new way of living, a new world. The blessing comes in knowing this road, this path, however challenging, is one that leads to life?



Focus scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

Additional scriptures

Revelation 7:9–1

Psalm 34:1–10

1 John 3:1–3



Seasons of the Spirit

is based on semi-continuous readings of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Blessed One, you never cease to surprise us. We grow accustomed to a way of accounting for our lives that often puts us in the losing column. Help us claim the identity and direction you offer to us so that we may stay on the road to your freedom, justice, mercy, and compassion. Amen.

Lection Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.



The Focus for Adults

Similar to last week, there is a tension in this week's focus text. It is common to read Matthew 5:1–12 as a text of preferential love. But these verses hold the very tension that makes being a follower of the Christ a challenge. Unlike the message of the "prosperity gospel" – a theology that claims that riches are somehow rewards – today's texts invite participants to embrace the fact that it is in our suffering and struggles that we might most intimately know God and be known by our Creator.

Some may find it difficult to believe they are blessed when they are facing challenging economic or relationship situations, but most adults will say they have felt blessed at some time in their lives. They also are likely to recognize those times they have been in the

position to bless others. Either way, it might not be easy for participants to define bless or blessing. Just what are we doing when we bless someone or ask for God's blessing? Just what does it mean to be blessed by God? How would you explain the concept of blessing?

Today is All Saints Day, a day when our gaze is pulled forward to the time when God's blessings and promises to all who believe will be fulfilled. A saint is one who has been chosen, or blessed, for the work of God, and this includes all those baptized into Christ. This maybe a new understanding for some in the group. Pray for group members, yourself included, that all may grow in understanding of what it means to live as a blessed saint in God's reign.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Revelation 7:9–17; Psalm 34:1–10, 22; 1 John 3:1–3; Matthew 5:1–12; and [biblical background](#) material (p. 51).
- ❑ Set a worship space with white cloth, pillar candle, and Bible with bookmark placed in focus passage.
- ❑ To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit www.seasonsonline.ca and click on Lektion Connection. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 9), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 9), and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available for purchase at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "Hold Us in Your Grace" (p. 12 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 9; #13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 9).

Engage

- ❑ Bring copies of the [biblical background](#) material (p. 51), as well as copies of the resource sheets "[Matthew 5:1–12](#)" and "[To Bless](#)."

- ❑ Bring several versions of the Bible and newsprint.

Respond

Choose from the options provided. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Art reflection:** Seasons of the Spirit poster or any other image that suggests the theme of hope or looking to the future
- ❑ **All Saints Day cards:** blank greeting cards or drawing paper, envelopes, coloured markers, names of people in your church preparing for Confirmation (Affirmation of Baptism), if any
- ❑ **Bless litany:** copies of resource sheet "[To Bless](#)"
- ❑ **Spiritual practice:** no additional materials needed

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the refrain for the song "Be God's" (pp. 10–11 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 9; #3 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 9).
- ❑ Bring copies of [biblical background](#) for November 8 (p. 57).



On the Right Road

Scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

FOCUS To celebrate God's blessings

Gather

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors.

Gather around the worship area and light the candle.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "Hold Us in Your Grace" (p. 12 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 9; #13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 9).

Pray Form two groups and read **Psalm 34:1–8** as an opening prayer, alternating verses between groups.

Moving into the theme

Ask group members to think back on their week, recalling one moment when they felt "blessed." Allow time to share stories, then discuss the following question.

■ **How would you describe the feeling of being blessed?**

Engage

Setting the context

Distribute copies of the biblical background material for this session. Set the scene by reading aloud the first two paragraphs about the focus passage, **Matthew 5:1–12**. It may help group members to scan the headings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–7:28) in their Bibles to get a sense of what Jesus is teaching in this section.

Exploring the texts

Distribute copies of the "[Matthew 5:1–12](#)" resource sheet. Ask group members to circle words that suggest the key point of each verse as they listen to a volunteer read the verses aloud. Form pairs to compile a list of the key words on newsprint and display them. Discuss:

- **What seems to be the thrust or intent of this passage?**
- **What is Jesus teaching about the life of discipleship?**
- **Why do you think Jesus uses the future tense ("for they will...") in speaking of blessings or rewards?**
- **What contrasts strike you in these verses? What seems to contradict the prevailing attitudes of contemporary culture?**

Compare the wording of the Beatitudes in several Bible versions. How is the phrase "Blessed are..."

translated? Next, distribute copies of the resource sheet "[To Bless](#)" and look at the synonyms for "bless" around the outside of the sheet. Form pairs to read Matthew 5:3–11, substituting other words for "blessed." As a group, discuss the following questions.

- **Which of these synonyms opens a new window of understanding into Jesus' teaching for you?**
- **According to Jesus, in what ways are the meek blessed? Those who mourn? Those who are merciful? Those who suffer for their faith? Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?**
- **When do you think the blessings that Jesus teaches about will be present fully?**

Like many of Jesus' teachings, Matthew 5:1–12 addresses what it means to live both in and toward the reign of God.

- **The passage mentions the "kingdom of heaven." What do you learn about this reign of God from Jesus' words.**

Other readings In **Revelation 7:9–17**, we encounter John's vision of the heavenly throne. Form pairs to read this text and report on what promise is made to the ones "robed in white."

- **What would you say about God and the nature of God's reign based on this passage?**

The writer of **1 John 3:1–3** proclaims that we are God’s children. In unison, read these verses aloud.

■ **What is the hope of God’s children?**

Making life connections

This week’s readings affirm that all who claim and

trust in the promises of God are blessed. The saints are invited to live in the presence of God’s promises and work toward their fulfilment.

■ **If you were writing guidelines for how to live as God’s saints, what would you include from the readings for this session?**

Respond

Choose from the following activities:

- **Art reflection** Those who trust in God and live faithful lives are blessed, declares Jesus. Allow a quiet moment to view the Seasons of the Spirit poster or other image you’ve selected. Read this guided meditation, pausing at ... for reflection: Imagine you are standing in this image. Where would you be?... What lies behind you?... What are you glad to leave behind?... What is your prayer as you reflect on what has come before?... What do you imagine lies ahead?... What are you looking forward to?... What is your prayer as you move into the future? After a quiet moment, invite reactions to this reflection.
- **All Saints Day reflection and card** In baptism, individuals join the communion of saints who live in the presence of Christ. In many churches, Confirmation (Affirmation of Baptism) is a ritual that affirms the presence of God in the participant’s life. Thinking about your own baptism or confirmation, or about someone who may be preparing for confirmation or adult baptism, what words from the readings today do you think fit best, or offer the most inspiration. If you know someone who is preparing for either ritual, create a card for that person, or a reminder for yourself.
- **Bless litany** All Saints Day is a time to celebrate God’s blessings and promises. As a group, write on the newsprint a litany of thanks for the blessings you receive as God’s saints. For ideas, you may want to refer to the verses and words on the resource sheet “[To Bless](#).” Create a common response line for the petitions of thanksgiving you write you write. Write the litany on newsprint to use in Bless. You also may want to offer it to the worship leaders in your church.
- **Spiritual practice** *Lectio divina* or “holy reading” is an ancient practice of meditating on scripture. Explain that **Psalm 34:1–10** will be read three times. Invite someone to read the passage and the rest to simply listen. Allow people time to reflect. Invite someone else to read the passage again, inviting everyone to listen for a word or phrase that attracts them, or speaks to them. After the second reading, invite those who wish to share the word or phrase they connected with, and why. Read the passage a third time, asking people to consider how the passage relates to their lives. Allow them to share, but not to comment or talk about what is shared. End with a time of silence.

Bless

Gather around the lit candle. Invite group members to spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the question: “To what extent do you see yourself as a partner in the service of Christ?”

Pray Lead the group in the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page (p. 51).

Sing or listen to, if possible, the refrain for the song

“Be God’s” (pp. 10–11 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 9; #3 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 9).

Blessing Use the litany created in “Respond” if you chose that option, or invite participants to bless each other by saying together, “We are blessed to be a blessing.”

Distribute the [biblical background](#) material for November 8 (p. 57).

Reflect

In what ways could you sense group members are expanding their understanding of what it means to be a saint, blessed by God? Take time this week to express thanks to the saints who have been important in your life.



Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)

- 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
- 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
- 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- 5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- 6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- 7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- 8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- 9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
- 12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”



To Bless

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|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| | pronounce as holy | glorify | |
| endow | <p>So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work God had done in creation. (Genesis 2:3)</p> | | consecrate for religious service |
| make a sign of blessing over | <p>...in you all families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3b)</p> <p>... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)</p> <p>They will receive blessings from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation. (Psalm 24:5)</p> <p>Let the little children come to me...and [Jesus] took them up in his arms, and laid his hands upon them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:14, 16)</p> | | |
| guard or protection from | <p>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. (Romans 12:14)</p> <p>Blessed to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places... (Ephesians 1:3)</p> <p>If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit, which is the spirit of God, is resting on you. (1 Peter 4:15)</p> | | make happy |
| | favour | give good fortune to | praise |